

## ON PRAYER

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**P**RIMARILY my theme is not liturgy, public worship, public ritual, but rather private worship, prayer as an enterprise of the individual self, as a personal engagement, as an intimate, confidential act.

Public worship is an act of the highest importance. However, it tends in our days to become a spectacle, in which the congregation remains passive, inert spectators. But prayer is action; it requires complete mobilization of heart, mind, and soul. What is the worth of attending public worship when mind and soul are not involved? Renewal of liturgy involves renewal of prayer.

There is, in addition, a malady indigenous or congenital to liturgy. Liturgy as an act of prayer is an outcome and distillation of the inner life. Although its purpose is to exalt the life which engenders it, it harbors a tendency to follow a direction and rhythm of its own, independent of and divorced from the energies of life which brought prayer into being. At the beginning, liturgy is intimately related to the life which calls it into being. But as liturgy unfolds, it enters a state of stubborn disconnection, even into a state of opposition. Liturgy is bound to become rigid, to stand by itself, and to take on a measure of imperviousness. It tends to become timeless, transpersonal; liturgy for the sake of liturgy. Personal presence is replaced by mere attendance; instead of erecting a sanctuary of time in the realm of the soul, liturgy attracts masses of people to a sanctuary in the realm of space.

I do not wish to set up a dichotomy of prayer and liturgy. This would contradict the spirit of devotion. I merely wish to concentrate my thoughts on prayer as a personal affair, as an act of supreme importance. I plead for the primacy of prayer in our inner existence. The test of authentic theology is the degree to which it reflects and enhances the power of prayer, the way of worship.

In antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages, due to the scarcity of parchment, people would often write new texts on top of earlier written

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parchments. The term denoting such writings is *palimpsest*. Metaphorically, I suggest that authentic theology is a palimpsest: scholarly, disciplined thinking grafted upon prayer.

Prayer is either exceedingly urgent, exceedingly relevant, or inane and useless. Our first task is to learn to comprehend why prayer is an ontological necessity. God is hiding, and man is defying. Every moment God is creating and self-concealing. Prayer is disclosing or at least preventing irreversible concealing. God is ensconced in mystery, hidden in the depths. Prayer is pleading with God to come out of the depths. "Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord" (Psalms 130:1).

We have lost sensitivity to truth and purity of heart in the wasteland of opportunism. It is, however, a loss that rebounds to afflict us with anguish. Such anguish, when converted into prayer, into a prayer for truth, may evoke the dawn of God. Our agony over God's concealment is sharing in redeeming God's agony over man's concealment.

Prayer as an episode, as a cursory incident, will not establish a home in the land of oblivion. Prayer must pervade as a climate of living, and all our acts must be carried out as variations on the theme of prayer. A deed of charity, an act of kindness, a ritual moment—each is prayer in the form of a deed. Such prayer involves a minimum or even absence of outwardness, and an abundance of inwardness.

### *a sanctuary for the soul*

PRAYER IS NOT A STRATAGEM for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home, the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home. Weary, sobbing, the soul, after roaming through a world festered with aimlessness, falsehoods and absurdities, seeks a moment in which to gather up its scattered life, in which to divest itself of enforced pretensions and camouflage, in which to simplify complexities, in which to call for help without being a coward. Such a home is prayer. Continuity, permanence, intimacy, authenticity, earnestness are its attributes. For the soul, home is where prayer is.

In his cottage, even the poorest man may bid defiance to misery and malice. That cottage may be frail, its roof may shake, the wind may blow through it, the storms may enter it, but there is where the soul expects to be understood. Just as the body, so is the soul in need of a home.

Everybody must build his own home; everybody must guard the independence and the privacy of his prayers. It is the source of security for the integrity of conscience, for whatever inkling we attain of eternity. At home I have a Father who judges and cares, who has regard for me,

and when I fail and go astray, misses me. I will never give up my home.

What is a soul without prayer? A soul runaway or a soul evicted from its own home. To those who have abandoned their home: the road may be hard and dark and far, yet do not be afraid to steer back. If you prize grace and eternal meaning, you will discover them upon arrival.

How marvellous is my home. I enter as a suppliant and emerge as a witness; I enter as a stranger and emerge as next of kin. I may enter spiritually shapeless, inwardly disfigured, and emerge wholly changed. It is in moments of prayer that my image is forged, that my striving is fashioned. To understand the world I must love my home. It is difficult to perceive luminosity anywhere if there is no light in my own home. It is in the light of prayer's radiance that I find my way even in the dark. It is prayer that illumines my way. As my prayers, so is my understanding.

### *the many purposes of prayer*

PRAYER SERVES many aims. It serves to save the inward life from oblivion. It serves to alleviate anguish. It serves to partake of God's mysterious grace and guidance. Yet, ultimately, prayer must not be experienced as an act for the sake of something else. We pray in order to pray.

Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will upon God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself. Prayer is necessary to make us aware of our failures, backsliding, transgressions, sins.

Prayer is more than paying attention to the holy. Prayer comes about as an event. It consists of two inner acts: an act of turning and an act of direction. I leave the world behind as well as all interests of the self. Divested of all concerns, I am overwhelmed by only one desire: to place my heart upon the altar of God.

God is beyond the reach of finite notions, diametrically opposed to our power of comprehension. In theory He seems to be neither here nor now. He is so far away, an outcast, a refugee in His own world. It is as if all doors were closed to Him. To pray is to open a door, where both God and soul may enter. Prayer is arrival, for Him and for us. To pray is to overcome distance, to shatter screens, to render obliquities straight, to heal the break between God and the world. A dreadful oblivion prevails in the world. The world has forgotten what it means to be human. The gap is widening, the abyss is within the self.

Though often I do not know how to pray, I can still say: Redeem me from the agony of not knowing what to strive for, from the agony of not knowing how my inner life is falling apart.

A candle of the Lord is the soul of man, but the soul can become a holocaust, a fury, a rage. The only cure is to discover that over and above the anonymous stillness in the world there is a Name and a waiting.

Many young people suffer from a fear of the self. They do not feel at home in their own selves. The inner life is a place of dereliction, a no man's land, inconsolate, weird. The self has become a place from which to flee. The use of narcotic drugs is a search for a home.

Human distress, wretchedness, agony, is a signal of a universal distress. It is a sign of human misery; it also proclaims a divine predicament. God's mercy is too great to permit the innocent to suffer. But there are forces that interfere with God's mercy, with God's power. This is a dreadful mystery as well as a challenge: God is held in captivity.

I pray because God, the *Shekhinah*, is an outcast. I pray because God is in exile, because we all conspire to blur all signs of His presence in the present or in the past. I pray because I refuse to despair, because extreme denials and defiance are refuted in the confrontation of my own presumption and the mystery all around me. *I pray because I am unable to pray.*

And suddenly I am forced to do what I seem unable to do. Even callousness to the mystery is not immortal. There are moments when the clamor of all sirens dies, presumption is depleted, and even the bricks in the walls are waiting for a song. The door is closed, the key is lost. Yet the new sadness of my soul is about to open the door.

Some souls are born with a scar, others are endowed with anesthesia. Satisfaction with the world is base and the ultimate callousness. The remedy for absurdity is still to be revealed. The irreconcilable opposites which agonize human existence are the outcry, the prayer. Every one of us is a cantor; everyone of us is called to intone a song, to put into prayer the anguish of all.

God is in captivity in this world, in the oblivion of our lives. God is in search of man, in search of a home in the soul and deeds of man. God is not at home in our world. Our task is to hallow time, to enable Him to enter our moments, to be at home in our time, in what we do with time.

Ultimately, prayer in Judaism is an act in the messianic drama. We utter the words of the *Kaddish*: *Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which He has created according to His will.* Our hope is to enact, to make real the magnification and sanctification of this name here and now.

A great mystery has become a reality in our own days, as God's response to a people's prayer. After nearly two thousand years the city of David, the city of Jerusalem, is now restored to the people of Israel. This marvellous event proclaims a call for the renewal of worship, for the re-

vival of prayer. We did not enter the city of Jerusalem on our own in 1967. Streams of endless craving, endless praying, clinging, dreaming, day and night, midnights, years, decades, centuries, millenia, streams of tears, pledging, waiting—from all over the world, from all corners of the earth, carried us of this generation to the Wall, to the city of Jerusalem.

*prayer is living*

PRAYER MUST NOT BE DISSONANT with the rest of living. The mercifulness, gentleness, which pervades us in moments of prayer is but a ruse or a bluff, if it is inconsistent with the way we live at other moments. The divorce of liturgy and living, of prayer and practice, is more than a scandal; it is a disaster. A word uttered in prayer is a promise, an earnest, a commitment. If the promise is not kept, we are guilty of violating a promise. A liturgical revival cannot come about in isolation. Worship is the quintessence of living. Perversion or suppression of the sensibilities that constitute being human will convert worship into a farce. What is handicapping prayer is not the antiquity of the Psalms but our own crudity and spiritual immaturity.

The hour calls for a revision of fundamental religious concerns. The wall of separation between the sacred and the secular has become a wall of separation between the conscience and God. In the Pentateuch, the relation of man to things of space, to money, to property is a fundamental religious problem. In the affluent society sins committed with money may be as grievous as sins committed with our tongue. We will give account for what we have done, for what we have failed to do.

Religion as an establishment must remain separated from the government. Yet prayer as a voice of mercy, as a cry for justice, as a plea for gentleness, must not be kept apart. Let the spirit of prayer dominate the world. Let the spirit of prayer interfere in the affairs of man. Prayer is private, a service of the heart; but let concern and compassion, born out of prayer, dominate public life.

Prayer is a confrontation with Him who demands justice and compassion, with Him who despises flattery and abhors iniquity. Prayer calls for self-reflection, for contrition and repentance, examining and readjusting deeds and motivations, for recanting the ugly compulsions we follow, the tyranny of acquisitiveness, hatred, envy, resentment. We face not only things—continents, oceans, planets. We also face a claim, an expectation.

God reaches us as a claim. Religious responsibility is responsiveness to the claim. He brought us into being; He brought us out of slavery. And He demands.

Heaven and earth were known to all men. Israel was given a third

reality, the reality of the claim of the word of God. The task of the Jew is a life in which the word becomes deed. A sacred deed is where heaven and earth meet.

We have no triumphs to report except the slow, painstaking effort to redeem single moments in the lives of single men, in the lives of small communities. We do not come on the clouds of heaven but grope through the mists of history.

There is a pressing urgency to the work of justice and compassion. As long as there is a shred of hatred in a human heart, as long as there is a vacuum without compassion anywhere in the world, there is an emergency.

Why do people rage? People rage and hurt and do not know how to regret, how to repent. The problem is not that people have doubts, but rather that people may not even care to doubt. The charity we may do is terribly diminutive compared with what is required. You and I have prayed, have craved to be able to make gentleness a certainty, and have so often failed. But there are in the world so many eyes streaming with tears, hearts dumb with fears, that to be discouraged would be treason.

### *pray to be shocked*

THE PREDICAMENT OF PRAYER is twofold: Not only do we not know how to pray; we do not know what to pray for.

We have lost the ability to be shocked.

The malignity of our situation is increasing rapidly, the magnitude of evil is spreading furiously, surpassing our ability to be shocked. The human soul is too limited to experience dismay in proportion to what has happened in Auschwitz, in Hiroshima.

We do not know what to pray for. Should we not pray for the ability to be shocked at atrocities committed by man, for the capacity to be dismayed at our inability to be dismayed?

Prayer should be an act of catharsis, of purgation of emotions, as well as a process of self-clarification, of examining priorities, of elucidating responsibility. Prayer not verified by conduct is an act of desecration and blasphemy. Do not take a word of prayer in vain. Our deeds must not be a refutation of our prayers.

It is with shame and anguish that I recall that it was possible for a Roman Catholic church adjoining the extermination camp in Auschwitz to offer communion to the officers of the camp, to people who day after day drove thousands of people to be killed in the gas-chambers.

Let there be an end to the separation of church and God, of sacrament and callousness, of religion and justice, of prayer and compassion.

A home is more than an exclusive habitat, mine and never yours. A residence devoid of hospitality is a den or a hole, not a home. Prayer must never be a citadel for selfish concerns, but rather a place for deepening concern over other people's plight. Prayer is a privilege. Unless we learn how to be worthy, we forfeit the right and ability to pray.

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.

The world is aflame with evil and atrocity; the scandal of perpetual desecration of the world cries to high heaven. And we, coming face to face with it, are either involved as callous participants or, at best, remain indifferent onlookers. The relentless pursuit of our interests makes us oblivious of reality itself. Nothing we experience has value in itself; nothing counts unless it can be turned to our advantage, into a means for serving our self-interests.

We pray because the disproportion of human misery and human compassion is so enormous. We pray because our grasp of the depth of suffering is comparable to the scope of perception of a butterfly flying over the Grand Canyon. We pray because of the experience of the dreadful incompatibility of how we live and what we sense.

Dark is the world to me, for all its cities and stars. If not for my faith that God in His silence still listens to a cry, who could stand such agony?

Prayer will not come about by default. It requires education, training, reflection, contemplation. It is not enough to join others; it is necessary to build a sanctuary within, brick by brick, instants of meditation, moments of devotion. This is particularly true in an age when overwhelming forces seem to conspire at destroying our ability to pray.

### *prayer is praise*

THE BEGINNING OF PRAYER is praise. The power of worship is song. First we sing, then we understand. First we praise, then we believe. Praise and song open eyes to the grandeur of reality that transcends the self. Song restores the soul; praise repairs spiritual deficiency.

To praise is to make Him present to our minds, to our hearts, to vivify the understanding that beyond all questions, protests, and pain at God's dreadful silence, is His mercy and humility. We are stunned when we try to think of His essence; we are exalted when intuiting His presence.

While it is true that being human is verified in relations between



man and man, depth and authenticity of existence are disclosed in moments of worship.

Worship is more than paying homage. To worship is to join the cosmos in praising God. The whole cosmos, every living being sings, the Psalmists insist. Neither joy nor sorrow but song is the ground-plan of being. It is the quintessence of life. To praise is to call forth the promise and presence of the divine. We live for the sake of a song. We praise for the privilege of being. Worship is the climax of living. There is no knowledge without love, no truth without praise. At the beginning was the song, and praise is man's response to the never-ending beginning.

The alternative to praise is disenchantment, dismay.

Society today is no longer in revolt against particular laws which it finds alien, unjust, and imposed, but against law as such, against the principle of law. And yet, we must not regard this revolt as entirely negative. The energy that rejects many obsolete laws is an entirely positive impulse for renewal of life and law.

"Choose life!" is the great legacy of the Hebrew Bible, and the cult of life is affirmed in contemporary theology. However, life is not a thing, static and final. Life means living, and in living you have to choose a road, direction, goals. Pragmatists who believe that life itself can provide us with the criteria for truth overlook the fact that forces of suicide and destruction are also inherent in life.

The essence of living as a human being is being challenged, being tempted, being called. We pray for wisdom, for laws of knowing how to respond to our being challenged. Living is not enough by itself. Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. And yet, being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is *not* the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be?

The tendency to forget this vital question is the tragic disease of contemporary man, a disease that may prove fatal, that may end in disaster. To pray is to recollect *passionately* the perpetual urgency of this vital question.

### *the uphill struggle*

ONE OF THE RESULTS of the rapid depersonalization of our age is a crisis of speech, profanation of language. We have trifled with the name of God, we have taken the name and the word of the Holy in vain. Language has been reduced to labels, talk has become double-talk. We are in the process of losing faith in the reality of words.

Yet prayer can only happen when words reverberate with power and inner life, when uttered as an earnest, as a promise. On the other hand,



there is a high degree of obsolescence in the traditional language of the theology of prayer. Renewal of prayer calls for renewal of language, of cleansing the words, of revival of meanings.

The strength of faith is in silence, and in words that hibernate and wait. Uttered faith must come out as surplus of silence, as the fruit of lived faith, of enduring intimacy.

Theological education must deepen privacy, strive for daily renewal of innerness, cultivate ingredients of religious existence, *reverence* and *responsibility*.

We live in an age of self-dissipation, of depersonalization. Should we adjust our vision of existence to our paucity, make a virtue of obtuseness, glorify evasion?

My own sense of the reality of food depends upon my being hungry, upon my own craving for food. Had I grown up on intravenous food injections, apples and beans would be as relevant to me as pebbles and garbage.

Do we know how to thirst for God? Do we know what it means to starve?

*O God, thou art my God, I seek Thee,  
my soul thirsts for Thee;  
my flesh faints for Thee,  
as in a dry and weary land where no water is.  
So I have looked upon Thee in the sanctuary,  
beholding Thy power and glory.  
Because Thy steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise Thee.  
So I will bless Thee as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on Thy name.*

*Psalms 63:2-4*

*As a hart longs for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul for Thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
while men say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?"*

*Psalms 42:2-4*

Religion is critique of all satisfaction. Its end is joy, but its beginning is discontent, detesting boasts, smashing idols. It began in Ur Kasdim, in

the seat of a magnificent civilization. Yet Abraham said, "No," breaking the idols, breaking away. And so everyone of us must begin saying "No" to all visible, definable entities pretending to be triumphant, ultimate. The ultimate is a challenge, not an assertion. Dogmas are allusions, not descriptions.

Standing before Mt. Sinai, Israel was told: "Take heed that you do not go up to the mountain and touch the border of it." Take heed that you do not go up to the mountain and only touch the border. Go to the peak! Once you start going, proceed to the very end. Don't stop in the middle of the road.

This is the predicament of man. All souls descend a ladder from Heaven to this world. Then the ladders are taken away. Once they are in this world, they are called upon from Heaven to rise, to come back. It is a call that goes out again and again. Each soul seeks the ladder in order to ascend above; but the ladder cannot be found. Most people make no effort to ascend, claiming, how can one rise to heaven without a ladder? However, there are souls which resolve to leap upwards, without a ladder. So they jump and fall down. They jump and fall down, until they stop.

Wise people think that since no ladder exists, there must be another way. We must face the challenge and act. Be what it may, one must leap until God, in His mercy, makes exultation come about.

What do we claim? That religious commitment is not just an ingredient of the social order, an adjunct or reinforcement of existence, but rather the heart and core of being human; its exaltation, its verification being manifest in the social order, in daily deeds.

We begin with a sense of wonder and arrive at radical amazement. The first response is reverence and awe, openness to the mystery that surrounds us. We are led to be overwhelmed by the awareness of eternity in daily living.

Religious existence is living in solidarity with God. Yet to maintain such solidarity involves knowing how to rise, how to cross an abyss. Vested interests are more numerous than locusts, and of solidarity of character there is only a smattering. Too much devotion is really too little. It is grave self-deception to assume that our destiny is just to be human. In order to be human, one must be more than human. A person must never stand still. He must always rise, he must always climb. Be stronger than you are.

Well-trodden ways lead into swamps. There are no easy ways, there are no simple solutions. What comes easy is not worth a straw. It is a tragic error to assume that the world is flat, that our direction is horizontal.

The way is always vertical. It is either up or down; we either climb or fall. Religious existence means struggle uphill.

*shattering the silence*

LIFE IS A DRAMA, and religion has become routine. The soul calls for exaltation, and religion offers repetition. Honesty, veracity does not come about by itself. Freshness, depth has to be acquired. One must work on it constantly.

To be moderate in the face of God would be a profanation. The goal is not an accommodation but a transformation. A mediocre response to immensity, to eternity, is offensive.

The tragedy of our time is that we have moved out of the dimension of the holy, that we have abandoned the intimacy in which relationship to God can be patiently, honestly, persistently nourished. Intimate inner life is forsaken. Yet the soul can never remain a vacuum. It is either a vessel for grace or it is occupied by demons.

At first men sought mutual understanding by taking counsel with one another, but now we understand one another less and less. There is a gap between the generations. It will soon widen to be an abyss. The only bridge is to pray together, to consult God before seeking counsel with one another. Prayer brings down the walls which we have erected between man and man, between man and God.

For centuries Jerusalem lay in ruins; of the ancient glory of King David and Solomon only a Wall remained, a stone Wall left standing after the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. For centuries Jews would go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to pour out their hearts at the Wailing Wall.

A wall stands between man and God, and at the wall we must pray, searching for a cleft, for a crevice, through which our words can enter and reach God behind the wall. In prayer we must often knock our heads against the stone wall. But God's silence does not go on forever. While man is busy setting up screens, thickening the wall, prayer may also succeed in penetrating the wall.

The tragedy is that many of us do not even know how to find the way leading to the wall. We of this generation are afflicted with a severe case of dulling or loss of vision. Is it the result of our own intoxication, or is it the result of God's deliberate concealment of visible lights?

The spiritual memory of many people is empty, words are diluted, incentives are drained, inspiration is exhausted. Is God to be blamed for all this? Is it not man who has driven Him out of our hearts and minds? Has not our system of religious education been an abysmal failure?

The spiritual blackout is increasing daily. Opportunism prevails, callousness expands, the sense of the holy is melting away. We no longer know how to resist the vulgar, how to say no in the name of a higher yes. Our roots are in a state of decay. We have lost the sense of the holy.

This is an age of spiritual blackout, a blackout of God. We have entered not only the dark night of the soul, but also the dark night of society. We must seek out ways of preserving the strong and deep truth of a living God theology in the midst of the blackout.

For the darkness is neither final nor complete. Our power is first in waiting for the end of darkness, for the defeat of evil; and our power is also in coming upon single sparks and occasional rays, upon moments full of God's grace and radiance.

We are called to bring together the sparks to preserve single moments of radiance and keep them alive in our lives, to defy absurdity and despair, and to wait for God to say again: Let there be light.

And there will be light.